



VERTIGO

1958

Directed by
Alfred Hitchcock

When Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* was released in May 1958 it was viewed as just a private-eye murder mystery that infuriated most moviegoers and critics at the time by revealing the "surprise" ending about two-thirds of the way through its labyrinthine plot. It was eventually written off as a slightly interesting failure. But as the years passed Hitchcock's romantic thriller slowly gathered a mystique and is now hailed as the director's masterpiece. Furthermore, in 2012 *Vertigo* replaced *Citizen Kane* (1941) in the *Sight & Sound* critics poll as the greatest movie of all time.

[SPOILERS AHEAD] *Vertigo* was based on the French novel *D'entre les morts* (From Among the Dead) by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac and became a Hitchcock project when Paramount Pictures purchased the rights. The film, set in picturesque San Francisco, centres on police detective John "Scottie" Ferguson (James Stewart), who takes early retirement from the force because of his acute acrophobia – a petrifying fear of heights. His decision is brought about when a police

colleague plunges to his death while trying to rescue Scottie who, whilst chasing a criminal, is left hanging from a roof gutter.

He finds some solace in the company of his old college sweetheart Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes), but not enough to marry her. Another old college pal, shipping tycoon Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), asks Scottie if he would shadow his wife Madeleine. Elster believes that his wife is becoming suicidal, perhaps as a result of being obsessed with her great-grandmother,

As they get to know each other, Scottie begins to fall in love with the enigmatic beauty. She tells him she has a recurring vision of the mission at San Juan Batista and Scottie takes her there, hoping he can erase her apparent delusions. She impulsively climbs to the top of the lofty mission tower, where Scottie, because of vertigo brought on by his acrophobia, cannot follow her. He is horrified by a scream and then helplessly watches as she plunges to her death. The shock causes Scottie to lapse into a nervous breakdown, through which he is nursed by the ever-faithful Midge.

Months pass and then by chance Scottie meets Judy Barton, a brunette shop girl who bears a remarkable resemblance to the sophisticated Madeleine. Scottie becomes obsessed with Judy and attempts to replicate her into his lost love by altering her hair, make-up and clothes. But by then Hitchcock, using a voiceover and flashbacks, has clued the audience to what Scottie does not know: Judy and Madeleine are the same person. In the dramatic denouement, Scottie realises he has been duped as an unimpeachable witness to the real Mrs Elster's "suicide", which was in fact a complex murder plot.

With the dependable James Stewart cast as Scottie, Hitchcock began a search for an actress who could portray both the esoteric

DID YOU KNOW: The impressive opening title sequence, designed by Saul Bass, is the first use of computer graphics in a movie.



Elster asks Scottie to shadow his wife Madeleine

Detective Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) hangs from the roof gutter in the movie's opening scene



Carlotta, who went mad and killed herself. Scottie is intrigued enough to take on the case and discreetly follows the beautiful blonde Madeleine around San Francisco. When she tries to drown herself in the bay directly underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, Scottie rescues her and takes her unconscious body back to his apartment and tenderly cares for her.

Madeleine and the street-wise Judy. Hitchcock's fascination with the "cool blonde" whose sexuality smoulders beneath an icy-cold surface has been well recorded. Many of his earlier female leads (Madeleine Carroll, Ingrid Bergman, Joan Fontaine) had approximated to this ideal. Then in 1954, Hitchcock found his consummate cool blonde with the actress Grace Kelly, who

FACT: *Vertigo* is the only Hitchcock production in which the killer is not punished. An ending in which Scottie and Midge hear news over the radio that Gavin Elster is being sought by the police was filmed following demands by the Production Code Administration. But Hitchcock ignored their demands and cut the scene from the final print.

he cast in three successive films – *Dial M for Murder*, *Rear Window* and *To Catch a Thief*. With Kelly it was a perfect coming together of actress and director, as she was physically and temperamentally just what Hitchcock had always wanted for his movie heroine. When she suddenly left Hollywood to become Princess Grace of Monaco, Hitchcock was devastated. For years afterward he would search for a substitute for Kelly, literally forcing a number of unlikely leading ladies into the same mould (Doris Day, Vera Miles, Eve Marie Saint, Tippi Hedren). But as far as Hitchcock was concerned, none of them matched the elegant star quality of Grace Kelly.

For the role of Madeleine/Judy he considered – and then rejected – Lana Turner, instead offering it to Vera Miles, who then proved unavailable when she informed him that she was pregnant. One of Hitchcock's production team then suggested Kim Novak.

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Her birth name was Marilyn Pauline Novak and in 1953 she had toured the States as Miss Deepfreeze in a promotional campaign for refrigerators. Whilst in Los Angeles she signed an agency contract which led to a screen test with Columbia Pictures. Studio head Harry Cohn immediately put her into the standard melodrama *Pushover*, opposite Fred MacMurray. The reception Kim received convinced Cohn that he may just have Columbia's answer to Marilyn Monroe. Kim often complained to friends that Cohn never called her anything but Novak, and the way he said it made it sound like an insult. (Away from her, Cohn often referred to her as "that fat Polack".) But despite their strained



Alfred Hitchcock and Kim Novak discuss a scene before filming



Kim Novak as the mysterious Madeleine

FACT: Hitchcock was angry at the critical and commercial failure of *Vertigo*. He blamed this partly on James Stewart for "looking too old" for the romantic lead. This was Stewart's fourth movie for Hitchcock and although the director had promised him the lead role in *North by Northwest*, he deliberately delayed the production until Stewart was filming another motion picture and then quickly signed up Cary Grant for the part. Hitchcock and Stewart never worked together again.

exceptional performance in *Vertigo*, as a guilt-ridden man with an all-consuming obsession bordering on the verge of insanity, is probably the most complicated role of his whole film career. Kim Novak also gave a flawless performance in the demanding dual roles of icy blonde Madeleine and the unrefined Judy. Furthermore, her convincing portrayal of the hauntingly beautiful Madeleine created one of the most alluring of movie femme fatales.

The colour cinematography capturing San Francisco and the masterful symphonic score by Bernard Herrmann, which gives added dimensions of yearning and tragedy, benefitted the film enormously. This was Hitchcock at the height of his storytelling skill with a camera and *Vertigo* is the deepest, darkest movie of his career with a storyline that practically imitates his own obsession with his leading ladies.

Although the movie broke even on its original release it did significantly less business than Hitchcock's previous productions, with many critics condemning it as a piece of fantastical nonsense. Alfred Hitchcock died in 1980, and some three years later *Vertigo* was given a new 35mm print and re-released. Almost immediately film critics and historians began to re-evaluate Hitchcock's film noir psychological thriller, and today, *Vertigo* is recognised as one of the most profound films in cinematic history.

relationship Kim's film career progressed rapidly under Cohn's direction, featuring her in *The Man with the Golden Arm* with Frank Sinatra; *Picnic* – her breakthrough film with William Holden; and *Pal Joey*, again with Sinatra. By the time Hitchcock requested her for *Vertigo*, Kim Novak was a bona fide movie star. He managed to borrow her from Columbia in exchange for a payment of \$250,000, and an agreement that James Stewart would co-star with her in Cohn's production *Bell Book and Candle* (1958).

James Stewart always had the ability to portray characters with a capacity for suffering whenever the movie plot called for it. But his



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